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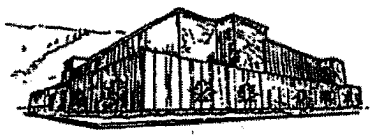

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PIETER BRUEGEL'S *THE BEEKEEPERS*
PROTESTANTS, CATHOLICS, BIRDS, AND BEES:
Beehive Rustling on the Low Plains of Flanders

by

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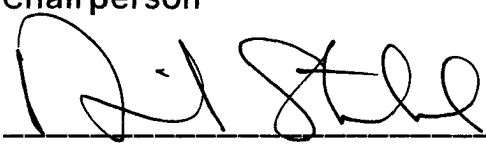

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Pieter Bruegel's *The Beekeepers:* The Meaning of Bees and Beehives.

Chair: Rafael Chacón

This paper investigates the meaning behind Pieter Bruegel's 1569 drawing, *The Beekeepers*. I explore two questions. Does *The Beekeepers* represent simply a genre work, or is the imagery intended to be symbolic? Further, if the images are symbols, do these symbols represent the conflict between Protestants and Catholics, as several scholars have put forth? While there is no conclusive evidence to determine the ultimate meaning of *The Beekeepers*, compelling evidence suggests that Bruegel intentionally alludes to the conflict between Protestants and Catholics, *and* that his drawing is "more" than simply a genre image.

Pieter Bruegel's *The Beekeepers* is a beautifully simple drawing. It is also perhaps one of Bruegel's most mysterious and haunting images. The drawing appears unusually serious or foreboding. Though Bruegel frequently depicts themes in this vein, rarely does he draw our attention in such tight focus. Bruegel addresses the viewer in a very different manner here. In many of Bruegel's pictures, serious elements are diffused by dozens of other elements -- some of which are intentionally humorous. Bruegel also tends to give the viewer more clues as to the overall, or *surface*, meaning of a painting or drawing. He gives us an easy way in before we are invited to explore further. With *The Beekeepers*, the imagery is cryptic from the outset. Any meaning or message seems intentionally mysterious and elusive. And some of the clues Bruegel supplies appear conflicting or obscure.

This paper will examine primarily two recent studies of *The Beekeepers* -- one by Jetske Sybesma and another by Matt Kavaler. The basic question is: To what end does Bruegel incorporate political or social messages in the drawing? Jetske Sybesma argues that *The Beekeepers* comments specifically on Protestant/Catholic relations.[1] She goes on to state that Bruegel was essentially "playing to both sides". The image could be read as siding with either Protestant or Catholic views, depending on the viewer's particular faith. Her view suggests that Bruegel, a documented Catholic, must have harbored Protestant sympathies. Matt Kavaler believes that this argument goes too far.[2] He views the drawing as a more general comment on

social disorder. In an attempt to come closer to Bruegel's intentions for the drawing, I will examine the drawing itself, as well as other contextual information surrounding Bruegel -- his life, other works, his audience, and his political and social sphere.

The Beekeepers' spare, open composition sets it apart from other works by Bruegel. *The Beekeepers* includes only four figures -- compared to the majority of Bruegel's pictures, which often include dozens and sometimes hundreds of figures. Three of the figures dominate the space like large monoliths. Other principal elements are also isolated and spaced apart evenly. Plants, landscape features, and other incidental items usually found in a Bruegel scene are reduced to a minimum. These compositional choices give *The Beekeepers* an almost modern appearance.

Bruegel's *The Beekeepers* is only 8 x 12 inches (only slightly larger than a typical size for his drawings -- especially drawings destined to be duplicated as prints). It is rendered in brown ink with a fine tipped pen. The exquisite and careful mark making is in keeping with Bruegel's drawing style, yet there is a freedom in the overall composition that relates more to Bruegel's landscapes than to his tightly contrived figure oriented work. The figures in *The Beekeepers* seem to dominate the shallow, stage-like landscape. The composition comprises three figures in full beekeeping garb, and a lone figure, perhaps a boy, several feet away sitting in the crook of a tree. In the far left foreground, the closest beekeeper clutches a large beehive basket to his chest, and appears to enter the

picture plane from the left. In the middle foreground, another beekeeper walks stiffly, with his hands at his side in the opposite direction toward the first beekeeper. To the right of the middle figure, a third beekeeper strains with his arms and shoulders working on a beehive's top. He appears to either attempt to pry the top off, or push it back on. Judging by the position of his hands and fingers, the figure could be pushing the top back on. On the other hand, the way the legs are positioned, and the way the figure's body strains away from the beehive, the figure could be bracing to pull the top off. Perhaps Bruegel is being intentionally ambiguous here. In the far right foreground corner there is an isolated beehive resting on the ground, tipped on its side in a tuft of grass. Just to its left is a conspicuous broad-leafed plant. The fourth figure, the boy in the tree, faces away from the viewer and the three beekeepers. He appears to be hiding from the bee- keepers, though I have not run across this particular interpretation. Just beyond the tree with the boy, yet another beehive sits upright below a shelter, apparently undisturbed. Beyond the small shelter, some rooftops and the spire of a church peer over a group of trees. And in the distance, a town is indicated with faintly drawn buildings on the horizon. A stream also winds toward the town behind the two figures on the left.

To the modern viewer, *The Beekeepers* invites many questions. Yet the imagery is not the stuff of "Boschian" fantasy, nor is it pictorially complex like much of Bruegel's work. Thus, a specific interpretation of the picture as a

whole seems within reach. We only have a few items to contend with. The drawing is similar to Bruegel's other work in that the narrative elements remain elusive symbols. Because the viewer is compelled to focus on the odd relationships of just a few figures and symbols, *The Beekeepers'* narrative reveals an enormous amount of tension.

The nature of the beehives themselves invites questions. The beehive baskets, also known as "skeps", do not appear to be in order (in a row, or positioned neatly together under the shelter, perhaps). The beekeepers appear to be moving or reorganizing the beehives. The figure moving into the picture plane from the left carries one of the beehives. Another lays on its side in thick grass or weeds. A third stands upside-down as a beekeeper attends to its lid. The fourth sits upright underneath the shelter, apparently undisturbed. Though the other skeps do not appear damaged, their placement in the drawing creates tension and suggests that something is "not quite right".

The beekeepers themselves present a mysterious and powerful formal presence. The hidden faces and the shapes of the bee cloaks give the three figures a sinister appearance. Their outfits resemble hooded monks habits or clerical garb. Their netted masks suggest a spider web pattern. Even more compelling, the netting on the masks also appears solid, like the end of a log, complete with growth rings. There is no indication of transparency or shadows behind the netting. Their relationship to each other is also curious. They do not appear to be engaged in everyday beekeeping activity. In this respect, the drawing is not typical of genre images

depicting beekeeping. The figures seem uncomfortable or on alert and there is the implication of chaos.

Two of the figures seem distracted from the task at hand. The foreground figure, in particular, turns away from his work and his fellow work mates. Disturbingly, he also appears to be facing the viewer, with his blank, log face. This confrontation is perhaps the most haunting aspect of the picture -- not only because the figure faces the viewer where one might not expect it -- but because the figure is essentially faceless! It is as if the figure is warning us or trying to tell us something, but we cannot read him.

The middle figure is nearly as disturbing. He is not engaged directly with a beehive, but appears to be walking toward the figure on the left. His gait is stiff and his arms are positioned oddly at his side. He is walking but he seems to be looking or watching rather than working, or about to do something. He could be on his way to retrieve another beehive, but he does not seem entirely engaged. His body language appears hesitant. It also suggests a furtive quality. He is stepping forward, but it is a small, cautious step. This figure is the central figure, so we are forced to consider its meaning as integral to the narrative.

The third beekeeper seems fully engaged in his task -- whether he is prying off, or replacing the top on the hive that he straddles. This figure is closest to the tree with the boy. Interestingly, he completes a "diagonal line of beekeepers", that starts with the far left beekeeper, and leads the eye to the boy and the church on the far right. Although this figure's behavior appears at first glance less

odd, Bruegel nevertheless posits yet another element of ambiguity regarding this figure's intentions and his overall meaning in the drawing.

The fourth figure, the boy in the tree, is the only figure related directly to the text at the bottom of the drawing. He is easily identifiable as "the nest robber" archetype. The Dutch inscription on the drawing reads, "*dye den nest Weet dye Weeten dyen roft dy heeten.*"[3] The inscription is loosely translated as, *he who sees the nest has the knowledge, he who robs it has the nest.* This version and its variations had been used repeatedly by Bruegel and his contemporaries. It was a common theme, and boy in the tree was a commonly used symbol. Bruegel devoted a small painting, *The Peasant and the Bird Nester,* to just this one subject. However, in *The Beekeepers* the boy in the tree has a few unique features that pose more questions. First, the boy faces away from the viewer as well as the other figures in the picture. In most renditions of this narrative or parable, the nest robber is a key figure -- his face is visible and can determine easily what he is up to -- reaching for eggs in a bird nest in the branch of a tree. (See, for example, David Vickenboons' *The Bird Nester.*) Generally this figure is engaged with the other key players (usually two bumpkins who are robbed blind by another while they gaze stupidly up in the tree at the nest robber). In *The Beekeepers,* we can determine no clear activity that the fellow in the tree might be engaged in. The figure is not reaching for anything, at least as far as we can determine. Nor is there anything to reach for -- there is no nest.

Also, the beekeeper figures seem unaware of the tree climber. They are not engaged with him at all. Clearly Bruegel knew that the viewer would question these juxtapositions and the unusual pairing of imagery. Bruegel is mixing things up here intentionally.

Generally Accepted Information on *The Beekeepers*

Only recently has *The Beekeepers* attracted the attention of art historians. Most scholars believe that it is one of the few Bruegel drawings that was likely intended for print (based on its size, completeness, and the way it is rendered), but either that is false, or the print has been lost. Many Bruegel drawings destined for print were done in a similar size and format --
8" x 11".

One apparently undisputed piece of evidence about *The Beekeepers* is that, at some unknown date, someone trimmed off its far right side. Some scholars also believe that someone may have trimmed the top of the drawing as well. The trimming at the top for example, may explain why no nest sits above the boy in the tree. On the far right, the trimming appears to be minimal. However, whoever trimmed the drawing also cut off the last Roman numeral of the drawing's completion date.[4] The date reads 1565 in its "cut" version. Most scholars agree that the last numeral in the date was cut off and place the date of execution somewhere between 1567 and 1568. Scholars seem to base this assumption on comparisons with Bruegel's other figurative drawings. For example, *The Beekeepers* is stylistically most akin to his

Spring, from 1565, and especially *Summer*, from 1568.[5] Both of these drawings use similar monumental figurative types. Scholars feel that *Summer's* composition and drawing technique more closely match those in *The Beekeepers*. In *Summer*, as with *The Beekeepers*, we also see several examples of obscured faces and heads, an uncommon depiction of central figures in Bruegel's compositions.[6]

Scholars, Critics, Interpretations

Carol Van Mander, the original champion of northern Renaissance art, planted the following provocative seed in his writings about Bruegel. "...he has made many skillful and beautiful drawings; he supplied them with inscriptions which, at the time, were too biting and too sharp, and which he had burned by his wife during his last illness, because of remorse, or fear that most disagreeable consequences might grow out of them."[7] This quote has been cited frequently by scholars as possible evidence that Bruegel harbored politically subversive thoughts or sentiments. Bruegel's work is often sufficiently open-ended symbolically to allow for this possibility.

Wolfgang Brandt has suggested that the figures in the drawing are villains.[8] Brandt's interpretation centers on the theme of the sin of avarice. The thieves are searching for the loot, while the figure in the tree is a lookout -- also a member of the gang of villains. Brandt's theory is bolstered by another interesting interpretation of the two closest figures. Brandt views the far left figure clutching the beehive as a "traitor", making off with the spoils. The

second figure is moving toward him and about to reach for a dagger hidden beneath his bee outfit. It is possible to make out a ghostly, dagger like shape drawn just below the left hand of the middle figure. Meanwhile, the third figure tries to pry open a beehive to retrieve more loot, while the figure in the tree maintains a sharp eye. Brandt ties the "bee" theme to the "nest" parable by stating that the figure in the center "knows" where the loot (the bee's nest) is, but the far left figure "has" it. Avarice is portrayed by the greed of the figure on the left, and the covetousness of the middle figure.[9]

The sin of avarice is a theme that Bruegel used frequently -- most obviously in the series *The Seven Deadly Sins*. The figure on the far left does appear somewhat furtive, and could be interpreted as a "thief", for example. Avarice may very well play a part in the story of *The Beekeepers*. However, this interpretation, like many before, does not explain other questions *The Beekeepers* poses. For example, why are beehives, generally a theme used in genre pictures, combined with the well known "nest robber" parable? Why are the thieves stealing from beehives rather than something more obviously valuable? It would seem that if avarice were the central theme, there might be a better choice for subject matter.

Why *did* Bruegel choose beehives? Sybesma suggests that the beehives are highly symbolic and that their message is politically charged. Moreover, Sybesma's analysis maintains that much of the imagery in *The Beekeepers* may contain hidden messages that are critical of the Catholic church and the

Spanish regime that controlled the Netherlands. Sybesma bases her thesis on several compelling questions.

Sybesma begins by referring to Van Mander's quote regarding Bruegel's request to have his drawings destroyed. She suggests that this may explain the "cropping" of the right side of the drawing, which obscures the date -- and that the *original* date of the drawing may have been incriminating in some way. Since most scholars agree that the date as shown on the drawing postdates 1564, Bruegel, or someone else, may have been trying to obscure the remaining roman numerals. The date of 1567 or 1568, for example, was a much more politically volatile time in Protestant and Catholic relations. These dates therefore would have been incriminating if the drawing had been interpreted as a reference to particular politically sensitive events of the time.

According to Sybesma, the beehive was a well-known symbol of the Catholic church. One year after the presumed date of *The Beekeepers'* completion, the Calvinist Marnix van St. Aldegonde published a work entitled "The Beehive of the Catholic Church", in 1569 -- a work highly critical of the Catholic church. The name of the publishing house was omitted, and it was published under a pseudonym to avoid the Inquisition. In the critique, Marnix states that the clergy are the bees that blindly protect the hive of the church. Sybesma suggests that Bruegel would have been in contact with those aware of Marnix's views, and that his beekeepers allude to not only clergy, but also possibly "anonymous informers" for the Inquisition.[10] The three beekeepers are of course

completely anonymous inside their protective clothing, which, as mentioned, also suggests habits worn by the Catholic clergy. For Sybesma, the beekeepers are in the process of repairing or restoring the hive, which has just been disturbed by iconoclasts -- a reference to the sacking of many Catholic churches during a Protestant uprising of 1566. Sybesma suggests that the figure in the tree is a symbol of the Reformation. The boy "must allude to those young men who defied the Inquisition by raiding the Catholic churches in August 1566."[11]

Sybesma notes other interesting interpretations of features in the composition. For one, the fact that the inscription does not correspond to the apparent narrative imagery may indicate a "polemical intention of the artist."[12] In other words it is another clue to the viewer to seek out meaning other than the literal, or traditional meaning; and more specifically, that the boy is symbolically in opposition to the beekeepers. The boy faces away from the presumed clergymen and instead gazes toward the direction of the church. Another interesting detail Sybesma notes is that the word for hive or basket carrier in Middle Dutch is *corfdrager*, which can also mean "secret informer". The figure in the far left is in fact "carrying" one of the beehives, which appears to be made from woven material, like baskets. Sybesma suggests that this figure could represent one of the many spies working for the Catholic church.

It is not known who, if anyone, commissioned *The Beekeepers*. Sybesma further examines *The Beekeepers'* probable audience and associates in hopes of gaining insight

into Bruegel's intentions. One of Bruegel's primary patrons was Cardinal Granvelle, councilor to Margaret of Parma, who had been recently appointed regent of the Netherlands. Granvelle, though somewhat moderate at times in order to keep the peace, was nevertheless answerable to the powers of church/state affiliation. Granvelle eventually was forced to clamp down severely on protestant uprisings. Another of Bruegel's important patrons was Niclaes Jongelick, a very wealthy merchant with strong ties to the Catholic church.

Sybesma, however, focuses on Bruegel's friends and lesser patrons to strengthen her argument that Bruegel many have been a Protestant sympathizer. Bruegel's associates and friends were humanists -- a group of complex and fascinating figures among the Antwerp elite. This group comprised mostly bankers, businessmen, scholars, and other artists. Interestingly, many of these men were overtly practicing the Catholic faith while privately practicing other faiths and philosophies.[13] The cartographer Abraham Ortilius, one of Bruegel's closest friends, was a member of a mystic sect called *Familia Charitatis*, or the *Family of Love*. This sect was one of several gnostic groups that humanists favored during the sixteenth century. Here we have evidence of the possibility of discourse critical of the Catholic church among Bruegel's closest associates.

Sybesma also finds evidence of a possible reference in *The Beekeepers* to a figure in Bruegel's humanist circle. Sybesma steers our attention to the large leafy plant in the center foreground. This conspicuous feature in the drawing could be interpreted as a fairly common indigenous plant

called the "plantain", but it could also allude to the famous Antwerp printer Christophe Plantin. Plantin, though a close friend of Bruegel's, was also well connected to the government and its Catholic ties. During this period, the Spanish became increasingly fanatical about cracking down on heresy or criticism of the state's religion. "After 1566, Plantin was actively engaged in securing permission to print the Polyglot Bible in honor of King Philip II of Spain. This permission was officially granted in April 1568, when the Council of Inquisition gave its approval."[14] Sybesma is unsure what the reference might suggest -- merely that it draws attention to the questions surrounding the fact that many figures in the Antwerp elite often played both sides.

Sybesma concludes that the drawing is intentionally cryptic, but nevertheless a comment on Protestant and Catholic relations. She states that the drawing is intended to *appear* politically neutral -- or rather, to appear to favor the Catholics, if you are a Catholic, and to favor Protestants if you are a Protestant. However, Sybesma suggests that Bruegel may well have had Protestant sympathies, based on his associations with contemporary humanists -- and that it is possible, like many of Bruegel's compatriots, that he was paying "lip service to the official religion"[15] and speaking in code to those in the know.

Matt Kavaler takes a much more cautious approach to *The Beekeepers*. In *Pieter Bruegel, Parables of Order and Enterprise,* Kavaler agrees with Sybesma's view that *The Beekeepers* imagery implies an inherent conflict and that a deeper meaning, other than the obvious, is intended.[16]

Bruegel's audience, mostly Christian humanists, were well versed in not only parables, but in hermeneu- tics in general. They were fond of intellectual challenges. Kavaler seems to imply here that the puzzling nature of the *Beekeepers* itself is not particularly unusual or provocative for Bruegel. On the other hand, Kavaler notes that the subject in *The Beekeepers* is likely speaking to social or societal conflicts. It is Kavaler's view that Bruegel's work, on the whole, is based in a commonly shared (among the elite) nostalgia for a societal order that was quickly disappearing. Kavaler states that Bruegel generally depicted narratives that were an attempt to cope in a *personal* way with the social transformations occurring during his time. Hence, many of the themes Bruegel employed centered on the spiritual, and moral self-control. In Kavaler's view, *The Beekeepers* represents this social upheaval in general, but does not specifically comment on the relationship between Protestants and Catholics. Nor does the drawing take sides. Rather, it is an attempt to depict the folly of "trouble making" in general.

Kavaler places *The Beekeepers* among Bruegel works he refers to as "utopian" images. "It is such an unusual portrayal of characters who were not often selected for independent presentation....possibly it might best be understood as a utopian image of a distinct kind, one that expresses a relationship between antithetical attitudes toward social organization."[17]
What does he mean by that? First, Kavaler notes that although bees and their hives were associated with the

Catholic church, these symbols *above all* represented a "model to all humanity."[18] A utopian image for Bruegel, according to Kavaler, would be that each sector of the social order remain in its place. Peasants were frequently depicted as being "good" if they minded their own business and remained busy tending to their bees. According to Kavaler, this view, among the elite was quite common, and a more likely approach to understanding the mysterious nature of the drawing. According to Kavaler, Bruegel repeatedly created images that suggested desire for social order, a fear of anarchy -- *Mad Meg.* 1561 and *Triumph of Death,* 1562, for example, but also the *Battle of Carnival and Lent,* 1559. Kavaler also cites the social atmosphere of the elite. For example, the *rederijkers* (community events that included literature, poetry, and plays) often featured themes that,

> laud the farmer for maintaining his bees, creatures who work diligently, live together in harmony, and obey their superiors - indeed a lesson for all foolish enough to rebel....for Bruegel's educated contempo-raries, the depiction of beehives and beekeeping could be understood as a visual trope, a consciously conven-tional sign, much as the proverb would have been read as a highly stylized form of textual authority.[19]

What about the figure in the tree? Kavaler states that Bruegel employed a compositional strategy here common to his own work and to many other artists' works during this period. This strategy involved relegating negative or oppositional elements of a composition to the corners of the work. The boy in the tree represents a rebel who is about to fall (a possible reference to *The Fall of Icarus*) and meet his doom while the beekeepers do their civic duty by

maintaining order. This interpretation is similar to Sybesma's except that for Kavaler, the boy does not specifically refer to an iconoclast. Moreover, Bruegel most likely would not sympathize with the figure, because is relegated to the corner, a symbolically "negative" position in many pictures of the time. The figure in the tree represents trouble-making in a general sense.

Several questions remain, however. What does the inscription at the bottom mean in this context? And if the image presents such a cautious view, why would Bruegel incorporate *The Beekeepers* with such ambiguous tension -- by including seemingly unrelated or conflicted elements -- the inscription, the upset beehives, the oddly depicted and posed beekeepers? Why imbue the drawing with such mysterious, or even sinister qualities?

Kavaler discredits Sybesma's argument based on the notion that most viewers of Bruegel's work would not have knowledge of esoteric symbols, such as beehives = Catholic church (Marnix published his work on this subject shortly after *The Beekeepers*).

> A direct connection with Marnix's *Beehive* [is also] doubtful, since it would require the viewer to possess an unusually intimate knowledge of this extensive text...More specifically it is true that the middle Dutch word corfdrager ("basket carrier" or "hive carrier") could mean "secret informer" as Sybesma notes, but there is no evidence that the term was commonly used during the mid sixteenth century, and its relevance to Bruegel depends on the assumption that the drawing bears an encrypted political message.[20]

This view is seemingly at odds with the generally accepted view that humanists liked literary puzzles. For Kavaler, the

puzzling nature of *The Beekeepers* is typical -- and because of this, it fits with a more conservative view of Bruegel in general. It assumes that Bruegel's audience for this piece would have been looking for hidden messages, but not necessarily *political* ones. Whatever the hidden messages may be, political or otherwise, the nature of Bruegel's audience is an essential key to understanding *The Beekeepers*.

Bruegel's Life

At this point in the discussion, it might be helpful to re-examine a few contextual issues touched upon in Sybesma's argument. Why would an upper middle-class artist catering to the elite in Antwerp wish to convey "coded" subversive messages in his work? How does *The Beekeepers* compare with his other works on this issue? Is Kavaler right in labeling Bruegel a political conservative, or is the answer somewhere in between?

Very little is known of Bruegel's personal life or thoughts, so there is scant evidence of his intentions as an artist. What we do have are his images, fragmentary evidence of his personal life, and historical context for our guides. Bruegel's first biographer, Karel Van Mander is one of the only early sources for this information. Van Mander's account, however, is sketchy at best. Moreover, Van Mander wrote his account some forty years after Bruegel's death, and in certain passages he appears to be "filling in" with second-hand information.

Pieter Bruegel was born sometime between 1525 and 1530. So, his date of birth is based on the typical age that

students would have entered an academy -- around the age of 20. Bruegel enrolled at the guild of St. Luke in 1551. His place of birth is uncertain. Van Mander states that Bruegel came from a village called Bruegel. However, there are two villages with that name -- one in Northern Netherlands and one in the South.[21] It is generally accepted that Bruegel studied later under Pieter Coecke van Aelst. However, this is sometimes disputed since Bruegel's style did not closely follow Coecke's, whose work showed more of an Italian influence. A connection to Coecke is nevertheless certain because Bruegel eventually married Coecke's daughter. In the early 1550's, Bruegel studied under Claude Dorizi in Mechelen. Also at some point in the early 1550's, Bruegel traveled to Italy. There, he made drawings and collaborated with the Croatian miniaturist and well-placed bishop Giulio Clovio on several works (all now lost), including a piece on the Tower of Babel, a theme which Bruegel was to repeat several times later in his career. According to Martin Royalton Kisch, Bruegel must have also sought out works by Michelangelo, who was "still active" during his visit.[22] (Interestingly, Kisch also notes a visual "quote" from a figure from *The Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel in Bruegel's *The Beekeepers*. The figure in the far left foreground of *The Beekeepers* indeed seems to reference Michelangelo's *The Sacrifice of Noah*. Both figures are positioned very similarly -- heads turned toward the viewer while holding cylindrical objects). Sadly, as is the case with much of Bruegel's life, little else remains in evidence from his trip to Italy.

Bruegel returned to settle in Antwerp soon after his Italian adventure, where he began to make drawings (designs for prints) for the publisher Hieronymous Cocke. He gained several important patrons, mostly prominent men among the growing upper middle- class. His patrons included merchants, bankers, the cartographer Ortelius, scholars and other connoisseurs -- in short, an elite group of Antwerp humanists. His early drawings and designs for prints were an apparent stepping stone for his painting commissions, which began to increase after several years of working for Cocke. It is important to note that during this period the work of Hieronymous Bosch was still in high demand, and that Coecke was in the business of selling copies of Bosch's prints. Scholars have suspected that Bosch's name was attached to some of Bruegel's early designs in order to sell prints. Bosch's influence was evident early on in Bruegel's work. And, as did Van Mander, many still consider him the "second Bosch".[23]

Nevertheless, this early work provided a steady income. At some point between 1562 and 1563 Bruegel moved to Brussels. Also, by the early 1560s, Bruegel's painting commissions had increased dramatically, and his drawing production had decreased -- possibly because more commissions were coming from Brussels, but also because Antwerp's economy was on the wane during that period.[24] Nearly all of his remaining paintings were created after the early 1560s, and in the last several years of his life. Scholars suspect that many have been lost, including a few from a series based on the months of the year, of which *The Gloomy Day* and *Hunters*

in the Snow may have been a part. Just under fifty paintings and about sixty drawings (about half of which were made into prints) have survived.[25]

Bruegel died in 1569, shortly after completing *The Beekeepers*. He was buried in Notre Dame de la Chapelle in Brussels, (a fact that leads us to assume Bruegel was a Catholic in good standing until the day he died).[26] Abraham Ortilius' epitaph provides another bit of mystery, however, and some insight into the hearts and minds of Bruegel's peers. Part of it reads:

> In all his works there is always something to understand beyond what is depicted; Eunapius, in Jamblicus, say the same of Timanthus. Artists who paint beautiful young people in the flush of youth and wish to add to their paintings a certain seductiveness and grace of their own invention completely ruin their work and depart both from their models and from true beauty. Our Bruegel is free of such a flaw.[27]

Ortelius seems to suggest here that Bruegel's style was indeed intentionally elusive and enigmatic. Several scholars have latched onto this section, particularly the first sentence: "In all his works there is always something to understand beyond what is depicted". What did Ortelius mean by that? This sentence suggests that Ortelius expected the use of metaphor and symbol in a Bruegel picture. Ortelius may have also suggested that Bruegel went a step further and included controversial ideas in otherwise unassuming genre pictures. When considered with Van Mander's account -- that some of Bruegel's drawings were so "biting" and "sharp" that he had them "burned by his wife" -- this view seems plausible. The second part of the statement however appears

to strengthen the argument that Bruegel remained true to Catholic values. The statement could read that Bruegel did not follow the pagan influences of mannerism, for example. Instead, Ortelius suggests that he remained true to narrative and instructive imagery which served the church.

Antwerp, Brussels: Economy and Politics

Antwerp was the commercial capital of the Netherlandish region from the early to mid-sixteenth century. Here, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, German and English merchants converged to trade a huge variety of goods. The largest economic influences resulted from Spanish and Portuguese imports from the Americas and the East Indies. The Portuguese especially established a strong trade relationship with the southern Germans between east and west Europe. Baltic grain came through Antwerp via this route. Spices, metals and textiles were also heavily traded. Antwerp had thriving textile, furniture, glass, paper, and book publishing industries. Christophe Plantin owned numerous presses, and his publishing company was famous throughout Europe. Hard cash was rarely exchanged. Rather, commerce functioned mainly through a credit system.[28] In spite of the success of the private, secular businessman, these groups were still heavily dependent on the government for trade. "Really big fortunes were made almost invariably in conjunction with government finance."[29]

Bruegel, however, found Antwerp on the wane economically by the time he matured as a painter. In 1552 the war between France and Spain began, and by 1555-6, the year Bruegel drew

Big Fish Eat Little Fish, crop failures created high grain prices which further aggravated the already terrible inflation Europe was experiencing. Meanwhile, the Spanish government was hugely in debt. This, in turn, put financial strain on its Netherlandish arm of the government. In 1560, the year Bruegel painted *Children's Games*, the Portuguese government declared bankruptcy, resulting in the world's "first big international bank crash."[30] Typically, the wealthiest merchants survived the crash. The smaller merchants and the poor suffered greatly. Antwerp began to shrink steadily in population and economically after this point. Antwerp's role as the economic hub of northern Europe was nearing the end.[31]

Art historians have differing views of the political climate of Antwerp and the North. Some scholars emphasize the tension between the peasant classes and the emerging upper-middle class. Several major peasant uprisings occurred during the first half of the 16th century. Other scholars emphasize the religious and political struggles between Protestant groups and the Catholic monarchy controlled by the Spanish Habsburgs. Still others consider many of these tensions overstated and that current events did not affect the artists and the elite classes directly enough to have much influence.

The central political events that affected the Netherlands during Bruegel's time revolved around the Protestant uprisings. In 1559, the war between France and Spain ended, freeing up resources to continue the battle against heresy. For this job, Philip II appointed Margaret

of Parma. It was Cardinal Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle, however, who was really in charge of governing, and it was under him that anti-heretic policy was enforced. At the same time, Philip strengthened the church/state relationship by appointing seventeen new bishoprics, "thus alienating the nobility"[32] by placing them underneath these newly formed positions of power. These newly appointed positions fell under the rule of Granvelle and the Council of State. This made Granvelle the Primate of the Netherlands as well as Chief Inquisitor. The freshly alienated nobility -- among them, the prince of Orange, the largest landowner in the Netherlands -- joined forces and eventually forced Philip to "recall [Granvelle] back to Spain in order to mollify the Netherlanders"[33]. For them, Granvelle represented an "unholy"[34] union between the church and state. Granvelle's departure further weakened an already vulnerable Netherlandish government. The Calvinists were able to take advantage of this weakness during these years, rallying the downtrodden population. Unemployment and hunger increased dramatically. Mob violence was rampant and church sackings were common. Although Margaret was apparently a diplomatic force, and at times voiced a course of moderation, these battles continued sporadically throughout the early to mid 1560s. Eventually Margaret was ordered to clamp down hard on heresy. Soon after, Philip was forced to reinstate forces in the Netherlands. In 1567, Philip called on the Duke of Alva from Italy to form the Council of Troubles, a "heretic-smashing" organization. In 1568, Alva executed two high ranking nobles, Count Egmont and Count Hoorne, under the

suspicion of heresy. During the same year, Alva condemned 12,000 heretics for "having taken part in the previous year's rebellions"[35] Alva, at least for the moment, successfully put down the rebellions. Historians estimate that up to 1,100 executions for heresy, iconoclasm, and sedition occurred between 1567 and 1574 in the Low Countries alone.[36] "So terrified were the Netherlanders that not a single town rose to support the prince of Orange when he invaded the Netherlands from Germany. But a policy of terror rarely wins friends."[37] Prominent Catholics began to search for solutions. Soon a sentiment for a national, rather than religious, unity began to take hold by the end of the 1560's, (when *The Beekeepers* was most likely created). This notion of a national unity by definition further weakened Catholic and Spanish power, favoring instead a more tolerant view, and consequently Protestant and other religious groups. Eventually, the those that favored a nationalist view moved north, further from Catholic influence, making Amsterdam the region's economic power.

So it appears that political and economic turmoil intensified during the period leading up to, and during, the creation of *The Beekeepers*. In light of the specific political issues of the time, *The Beekeepers* seems a likely candidate for an image responding to the times. This is, after all, one of Bruegel's trademarks, using metaphor to describe current events or popularly discussed moral issues.

Bruegel's Audience

As touched upon earlier, Bruegel's peers in Antwerp were

mainly an elite group of wealthy merchants. We do know that Bruegel was successful in his day and was much respected by this group. Among these men, Abraham Ortelius stands out as a figure closely associated with Bruegel. Ortelius seemed to embody the perfect example of the worldliness among the strengthening upper-middle class. While this relatively new sector in society could not compete with the aristocracy in terms of luxury, they could nevertheless indulge in cultural activities, such as travel, reading, writing, dialogue, and art appreciation. Most importantly, they were able to afford prints and even the panel paintings of major artists.[38] Thus, a new type of art patron emerged en force, further solidifying the notion of connoisseur- ship. Ortelius was a Bruegel collector, a connoisseur of the arts -- a dandy.

Abraham Ortelius ran a highly successful publishing house for maps. His work was supported and often financed by some of the leading merchants in Antwerp. By 1570, Ortelius had published the world's first "user-friendly" atlas. This world guide was not only an instant international success, but continued to create business opportunities for Ortelius. As more and more of the world was being discovered, its subsequent revisions were a "cash cow".[39] Ortelius first came into contact with Bruegel during Ortelius' early days as an apprentice at the Guild of St. Luke as a map engraver. There, he also became acquainted with many other leading artists as well as prominent figures in the business community of Antwerp. As mentioned, Ortelius was also a member of the Family of Love, (schola caritatis), a secret group that quietly accepted organized religion, but "rejected all

hierarchy and ceremony" and, as some scholars see it, "stood in opposition to the ideologies of [many] of Bruegel's patrons".[40] However, according to Snyder, The Family of Love "was an intellectual fellowship of scholars devoted to peace in troubled times" and did not "ban membership in any religious group since they argued that it was acceptable so long as it did some good"[41] Whether he was a member of this group is unknown. We can infer, however, that Bruegel was at least exposed to this group and its ideology.

Businessman Niclaes Jongelick was probably *not* a member of the Family of Love, though he was well acquainted with Ortelius. Jongelick was Bruegel's most important collector and owned sixteen Bruegel paintings. Jongelick was a "staunch Catholic," had close ties with King Philip II, and even collected taxes for him.[42] Jongelick also socialized among Antwerp's businessmen and elite humanists, such as Ortelius. His connection to the art community is well documented, and, in addition to Bruegel's work, Jongelick also owned works by Albrecht Dürer and Frans Floris.[43] Jongelick eventually made bad business decisions and "defaulted on loans, including loans to Philip II."[44] Larry Silver depicts Jongelick as a bit of a louse. "Jongelick was a prosperous urbanite who lived ostentatiously and enjoyed his role as patron to the leading artists of the city, even while putting his money out in speculative loans."[45]

Perhaps the most clearly conservative and Catholic of Bruegel's patrons was Cardinal Granvelle -- thought to have owned two of Bruegel's paintings.[46] Granvelle is therefore somewhat of a mysterious character. On the one hand, he was

closely associated with prominent humanists, and on the other, he served the Spanish king and frequently, "took a harsh stand against heretics".[47] Granvelle's connection to Bruegel and other presumed humanists raises questions. It further strengthens the argument that these prominent men were playing several different hands at once -- almost by necessity. The businessmen and the ruling class were at odds, but at the same time needed each other to survive. What was the nature of conversation among these men? Perhaps Granvelle and Ortelius discussed relations between Catholics and Protestants. Chances are that they did not. But how much "humanist" conversation occurred between these two -- what kinds of topics were allowed -- what was taboo? Surely Bruegel and Ortelius, for example, shared more provocative thoughts. *The Beekeepers* seems likely a work that would have sparked good conversation among such men. It is not known, however, if any of these men ever saw the drawing.

More Social Context and Bruegel's Contemporaries

Much research has been done on the intellectual atmosphere surrounding Bruegel's work. Past scholars have assumed that Bruegel's primary sources were from the folklore of the Netherlands. More recently, scholars have discovered that Bruegel and other contemporaries did not work in this way. Bruegel was frequently thought to have a close association with peasants. For example, Bruegel frequently featured peasants as primary subjects for his work. However, most scholars feel now that peasants and peasant lore were

merely a structural element upon which to hang many themes and ideas. Also, like most of his contemporaries, Bruegel drew upon an enormous variety of sources, from "indigenous" to classical. In fact, the fifteenth-century audience expected this from a Northern Renaissance artist.

Margaret Sullivan, for example, places Bruegel's work firmly in the tradition of the Italian humanists. The elite circle of connoisseurs, according to Sullivan, stressed the importance of classical literature, morality, and the liberal arts, along with Christian ideals. "A humanist orientation toward art and literature is pervasive in the North in the 1550s and 1560s, influencing all aspects of cultural life, including pageantry, drama, public displays, the activities of rhetorical societies, the literature published and read, and the paintings and prints that were produced and sold."[48] Sullivan also stresses the importance of Erasmus as a figure that is in part responsible for the promotion of these ideas. For one, Erasmus was a pioneer in synthesizing classical ideas with folklore. This way of thinking was becoming increasingly more common as the 16th century progressed. Erasmus' book of adages was still a hot seller in Bruegel's time. Adages or proverbs were an integral part of intellectualism during the 16th century. "Humanists in the sixteenth century used proverbs as a didactic device, a tool for moral instruction."[49] Hermeneutics and intellectual puzzles were hugely popular. Erasmus describes proverbs as being like riddles, and that most "have some kind of metaphorical disguise."[50] Sullivan also credits Hieronymous Bosch for having pioneered the use of proverbs. So, we have

a precedent for humanist thinking that goes back to at least Bosch's time -- around the early 1500's. Bruegel's images followed this pattern.

Sixteenth century intellectuals participated in another cultural phenomenon called *Rederijker* dramas. Walter Gibson stresses that *Rederijkers,* or rhetoricians, have not been properly discussed in terms of their influence on Netherlandish artists. Rederijker events were literary performances that frequently involved plays, poetry and parades. They were festive events that drew audiences from all sectors of society, especially "artisans, craftsman, and small shopkeepers"[51]. Many of the performances were comedies, but others were more serious and laden with heavier moral content. "*Rederijkers* literature frequently gave voice to the religious tensions of the day, as well as treating such subjects as impending war, civil disorder, grain shortages and rising prices. Because of these topical concerns, these [events] often drew upon them suspicion of the civil and ecclesiastical authorities, and their plays were sometimes suppressed."[52]

Rederijker events also reflected the preference for incor-porating worldly sources with local flavor. For one, in the tradition of Erasmus and other leading intellectuals, these events "encouraged the use of native Netherlandish languages for serious literature....it has not been sufficiently stressed that they also disseminated a humanist culture through the subjects they drew from ancient mythology."[53]

Abundant evidence shows that the elite crowd in Antwerp

enjoyed a variety of ancient and contemporary literature as well as politically-oriented discussion and dialogue. In fact, it appears that many in the upper middle class, and even some in the lower classes, thrived on such a cultured atmosphere. Political questions were discussed -- and even had a popular forum in these *Rederijker* events. The fact that they were at times "suppressed" may also provide insight into how provocative the topics may have become. During the time Bruegel drew *The Beekeepers,* plenty of political turmoil hit close to home. It would, therefore, seem likely that Bruegel discussed these issues with his humanist friends. Whether or not he went so far as to incorporate a *specific* political agenda into some of his work remains a question.

One curious trend that appears increasingly among the general population as well as the elite humanists is the notion of tolerance and its cousin, moderation. Take the case of Dirck Coornhert, a close associate and member of the circle of Ortelius who was approximately the same age as Bruegel. Reinder P. Meijer writes:

> The Humanism of the northern Chambers of Rhetoric found its most complete expression in the work of Dirck Coornhert, an engraver, printer, public servant and writer. Born in 1522, he was in his forties when the revolt against Spain began and much of his work reflects the conflicts of that period. In modern terms, Coornhert was very much an engaged writer, without being committed to either the Protestant or the Roman Catholic cause. His main commitment was to the cause of tolerance. He was its great champion in days when tolerance was regarded by many as a dirty word and when life was not made easy for those who had the courage to think along subtler lines than the crude black-and-white schemes presented by the die-hards on either side.[54]

Coornhert, though active in many areas of the arts, was primarily known for his writing. Coornhert translated classical authors such as the writings of Seneca and Cicero and works such as the *Odyssey* from Latin into the vernacular. He also wrote plays and poetry, but he was primarily known for his prose. On the issue of tolerance, and though "closer to Protestantism"[55] and even jailed several times for suspected heresy, Coornhert demonstrated a distaste for the dogmatism of Calvinist thinking by reacting against the riots of 1566 -- even hiding art work and cultural treasures while Catholic churches were being sacked. In 1561, Coornhert wrote a critique of Calvinist doctrine to which Calvin himself replied, calling his opponent a "raving dog" and an "uncircumcised Goliath".[56]

In 1586, Coornhert wrote *Ethics, That is the Art of Living Well,* the first work of its kind written in the vernacular.[57] The work borrows heavily from classical authors as well as contemporary humanists -- primarily Erasmus. In spite of this, Meijer calls the work "a very original and independent book in which he sets forth his personal philosophy and with great psychological insight discusses man's strengths and weaknesses....Coornhert's attitude towards intolerance and immoderateness, his aversion to dogmas such as original sin and predestination, come through very clearly."[58]

Though tolerance is not necessarily an obvious theme in Bruegel's work, themes surrounding the idea of moderation are certainly common -- especially in terms of a much broader theme in Bruegel's work -- that of folly. Seen in this light, perhaps *The Beekeepers,* is more a message of tolerance

-- depicting the folly of both sides in the struggle between Protestants and Catholics. For example, the notion of moderation seems to be a central theme in Bruegel's *Battle Between Carnival and Lent,* from 1559. As Kavaler points out, "Observing measure in all things was one of the clichés of sixteenth-century European culture...if Carnival license is no acceptable guide for life, neither is Lenten penitence; the Middle Way is the proper course between both extremes."[59] In addition to themes of moderation, Bruegel exhibits evidence of pacifist themes as well -- images that depict horrors of war and disorder. Again, the *Triumph of Death,* 1562, and *Dulle Griet (Mad Meg),* 1561, are obvious examples. Pacifism and tolerance were after all also important moral tenets of the *Familia Charitatis,* or *The Family of Love,* and many humanist thinkers of the time. In addition, it is difficult to imagine an artist, a creator of icons in a sense, going so far as to espouse an extreme form of iconoclasm.

The publishers literature and prints may also help to shed light on the views of Bruegel's contemporaries. Although Bruegel's print publisher, Hieronymous Cock, confined his audience primarily to collectors and the elite of Antwerp, other publishers targeted a wider audience, and some even focused on political events for subject matter. An increase in demand for political propaganda began to develop after the iconoclastic uprisings of 1566. Publisher Pieter Baltens, for example, took advantage of this political turmoil. Baltens published a book of prints in 1580 designed to promote Catholicism's use of images and icons. Its

purpose is explained in the preface of the book. Jan Van der Stock describes it as, "...effectively a visual and obviously apologetic translation of the Council of Trent (1563)."[60] This treatise, of course, mandated some of the most severe policies of the Inquisition. Baltens himself became increasingly critical of Spanish policies, which even among many Catholics, seemed excessively harsh, and even harmful to the Church itself. Many others also saw the Church being exploited in the name of political power. Baltens eventually capitalized on this trend as well. One of Baltens' images speaks directly to this subject. The print *Dialogue between Man and Religion* depicts Religion as a large female angel trampling Death, with a battle scene as a backdrop. The caption on the print delivers a very direct message, explaining that "intrinsic religious values are worth more than churches with all their splendour.... [and] religion has nothing to do with war, but is merely being used as an excuse to justify it: the cause of the conflict is elsewhere."[61] This message is, of course, heretical, but it also can be seen as a voice of moderation and tolerance. The image is certainly a critique of war as a solution for religious conflict -- whether through Catholic tyranny or Protestant revolts. It is also interesting because it provides evidence that many of Bruegel's contemporaries questioned the motives behind religious conflict.

References to Birds and Bees

Kavaler argues that the bee references in *The Beekeepers*

do not necessarily represent the Catholic church, as Sybesma suggests. " more commonly, bees and their hive were a model to all of humanity. It was in fact their harmonious social organization and effective division of labor that were most often cited as exemplary."[62] Kavaler quotes Shakespeare's *Henry V*, "...for so work the honey bees, Creatures that by a rule in nature teach, The act of order to a peopled kingdom."[63] Nevertheless, the beehive was also well known as a symbol of the Catholic church. In Bruegel's *Battle between Carnival and Lent* from almost ten years earlier, for example, the personification of "Lent" wears a beehive hat. Interestingly, Kavaler acknowledges the obvious reference in his description of the painting. "Opposing Carnival is Lent, a gaunt figure dressed as a nun who wears as her crown a beehive, a symbol of the church."[64] It appears, therefore, that Bruegel has used the beehive as a specifically Catholic reference. In *The Beekeepers*, the hives represent no obvious symbol. Kavaler, therefore, argues for a more general and common interpretation. Essentially, Kavaler relegates *The Beekeepers* to something closer to a genre image, where beekeeping is primarily understood as something that "good peasants" do -- work hard and remain in their prescribed social order. It seems apparent, however, that the hive/church metaphor is known nearly, if not equally, as well as Kavaler's more generalized interpretation. It could be argued that since Bruegel used the beehive previously as a Catholic symbol, this association is already understood among Bruegel's audience. In other words, viewers of Bruegel's *Beekeepers* would already be aware of this association, and

could not help but make the connection. It is worth repeating here that a church is included in the composition. If this drawing is not simply a genre image, surely including a church is not by accident. We are therefore forced to deal with metaphors for beehives and churches in the same image. While there is no definitive proof either way, a neutral reading of the beehives seems unlikely.

In Bruegel's work, there are several examples of hives and bees: *Ass in School* (where a naked student squats inside a beehive, exposing his backside, and extends his arm between his legs out of the hive -- which holds what appears to be the alphabet written on a page), *Hope*, from *the Seven Virtues* (Hope personified wears a beehive hat), and *Envy*, from *the Seven Deadly Sins* (a beehive appears in the far upper right on a tall pole and dressed to look like a figure complete with scarf and hat). Curiously, scholars have not offered definitive information regarding the meaning of these skeps (beehives) in the context of those drawings. Referring back to the *Battle between Carnival and Lent*, Irving Zupnik offers more evidence that the hive symbol may have been more commonly read in terms of religion rather than more generally (Kavaler's view) in Bruegel's world. Although beehives were traditionally symbols of "good" behavior, particularly in the context of an "industrious monastic community," they also, "acquired a derogatory connotation among sixteenth century Protestant polemicists."[65] Zupnick references Marnix here as evidence of this attitude. However, he also seems to imply that the negative connotation may have already been "in the air" among writers and thinkers. The beehive, therefore,

could have assumed both negative and positive connotations with no apparent contradiction. Part of Bruegel's moralizing was this notion of drawing attention to the folly of extreme views and behavior. "Bruegel's view of social conflict is akin to that of Erasmus, who in his commentary on the ancient proverb, "Scarabeus Aquilam quaerit" (the beetle attacks the eagle) condemns both the eagle , symbol of the tyrant prince, and it enemy, the dung beetle, courageous and cunning but vile and filthy defender of the hare, the eagle's natural prey: symbols both, beetle and hare, of the people the tyrant oppresses. Erasmus sees beetle and eagle as unequally armed yet somehow balanced opponents, destined foolishly to fight forever."[66]

Erasmus' thoughts may have to be our definitive view on the question of bee symbolism. He is after all the primary intellectual influence among northern humanists and perhaps the greatest influence on Bruegel's subject matter. From his Adages, first published in 1508, Erasmus used the beehive as metaphor for the Catholic church, criticizing, as well as praising it.

> If popes set afoot some policy which is a little further than one could wish from the traditional and apostolic holiness of their office, these are the men whose services they mostly use; be it for war, for instance, or civil disorder, financial exaction, or an unwise indulgence, these are the plays in which these men play the lead, and all the time the simple-minded public are deluded by their show of holiness. Priest compared with them are no priests at all; bishops trust them and sleep sound on either ear. The poor abandoned public instead of living under single shepherds is torn in pieces by a double kind of wolves: their bishops rule as tyrants, for are these men shepherds but robbers of another sort.
> Let me repeat: I do not criticize the good among

> them, or the religious order. There are among them of the highest integrity, who deplore the same things I deplore. Bees can from time to time drive out their drones, however thievish, for they have no sting. These drones have sharper stings than any hornet, and neither kings nor popes could drive them out of the commonwealth without disaster to the Christian religion, so well defended are their secret gangs, so well have they secured the whole world with their fortresses and their troupes, building themselves new nests every day, on the ground, no doubt, that the religious fervour of the earlier monasteries, and the reputation for it o which those houses owed their rise in the first place, are now no more, as though the sincerity of their own religion would not soon be no more in its turn...[67]

In this text, there is not only an early association of the beehive with the Catholic church, but also a negative association early in the sixteenth-century.

A couple of images in Eva Crane's *World History of Beekeeping and Honey Hunting* have "demystified" certain aspects Bruegel's *The Beekeepers*. For example, though I have found no examples in other contemporary images of the type of masks depicted on the outfits of Bruegel's beekeepers, I finally found an almost exact match of a Dutch version from the early 1800s (fig. 1). Thus, Bruegel's depiction of the mask was more than likely a fairly common type of mask, and not an unusual rendering. Nevertheless, I have not run across another depiction of this type of beekeeping outfit -- neither the mask, nor the monk's habit-like clothing. A beekeeping scene by Hans Bols from 1582 (fig.2) depicts skeps neatly in a row underneath a shelter but also shows one lying on the ground near a figure collecting a swarm from a tree. In a nearly identical scene by Jan van der Straat from 1580 (fig.3), a skep lies on its side below a figure collecting a

swarm from a tree. Incidentally, in each of these scenes, other figures are depicted in the act of "tanging", or banging on metal bowls to make the bees "settle". If we compare the composition of these examples of beekeeping to Bruegel's work, the differences appear striking. In *The Beekeepers*, the figures themselves appear to be the subject. Their scale dominates the scene. The central figure in particular stands out because he is not engaged in any discernible activity. Then there is the figure facing the viewer. The figures are imposing or even confrontational. By contrast, in Bols' and van der Straat's examples, the activity itself -- an entire scene and many of its particulars are depicted in descriptive way -- they do not seem to hide or hint at anything -- they are typical genre images. *The Beekeepers* style and composition suggests more than this.

Both Kavaler and Sybesma reference Bruegel's *Nest Robber* (fig 4), as well as other images from the period based on the parable that has been discussed. As mentioned, other artist's bird nesting parable imagery appears to be fairly common and straightforward. No significant questions surrounding the meaning of images, such as Nicolaes Jansz (after David Vinckboons) *The Bird-Nester, 1*610 (fig. 5), have been put forward. Generally, these images follow the literal meaning of the parable itself -- that is, the drawing "sides" with the youth that is robbing the nest. Essentially, he who risks nothing gains nothing. Both of Bruegel's examples of this parable offer more complex messages. *The Beekeepers* is of course the most puzzling. However, even the painting *Nest*

Robber from 1568, which appears fairly straightforward initially is not what it seems. Kavaler points out that Bruegel does not simply depict two witless bumpkins paying the price for simply "knowing" where the nest is, and watching someone else reap the spoils (as in Vinckboon's drawing and Jansz's subsequent print). Bruegel's depiction of the figure that represents this part of the story faces the viewer directly -- in effect pulling the viewer into the story. Moreover, the figure is not necessarily a hateful boor. His face, though perhaps vacuous presents a more ambiguous expression, almost gentle. Whatever the case, Bruegel does not want us to simply laugh at the folly of this figure (who is about to step off an embankment into a creek), he forces the viewer to identify with this figure, rather than dismiss him so easily.[68] And, although *Nest Robber* does not offer much insight into the specific significance of the "nest parable" in *The Beekeepers,* it does say something about the way in which Bruegel treats popular morals and parables. Bruegel incorporates a complexity -- and a human quality --in scenes representing traditionally straightforward, "black and white" messages.

Conclusions

Bruegel's audience and closest associates were probably among those who did not take sides -- at least not openly. Rather, their world was no doubt made much worse by the political turmoil of the day -- they had far less to gain by rebelling. And if even only for selfish reasons, they would have desired peaceful resolution to these conflicts. At

the same time, these men engaged themselves in political dialogue. The term humanist did not necessarily mean a peace-loving, anti-classist, or non- racist liberal. Leonardo, for example, designed elaborately cruel mechanisms for war use. Also, much of the progressive thinking involved science and rational solutions for the betterment of the elite.

On the other hand, as several scholars have pointed out, the terrible religious wars between the Protestants and Catholics and their disastrous consequences eventually became distasteful and seemed irrational to many intellectuals.[69] Bruegel *does* appear to be one of the early artists to have, as Arnold Hauser puts it, a certain "self-consciousness".[70] The changing social and political structures in late sixteenth century Netherlands seems to have created a freer atmosphere for artists, where individual opinion was increasingly valued.

Was Sybesma correct in her interpretation of *The Beekeepers*? Did Bruegel incorporate intentionally subversive elements in his drawing? Or, were these elements less provocative, as Kavaler believes? Was Bruegel an upper-middle class humanist, hoping to maintain his position in a rapidly changing world? It seems that the answer is somewhere in between. Certainly, as Irving Zupnick points out, Bruegel was not immune to political and historical disasters -- we have obvious examples like the *Triumph of Death* as proof.[71] There are also numerous other references to social conflict and the resulting follies of humanity. As Zupnick points out, "...while he [Bruegel] maintained an air

of detachment and tried to show that neither side had a monopoly on folly and madness, he was not unmoved by cruelty and suffering."[72] When depicting political events, Bruegel would have dealt with them in the same way he dealt with other moral issues -- taking a cue from the literary trends of his times by employing a similar degree of complexity and intentionally obscure metaphorical devices. His style already lent itself to disguising the obvious, had he desired to incorporate subversive ideas.

There is plenty of compelling evidence that suggests *The Beekeepers* might fall into this category. On the other hand, it also appears that many of Bruegel's compatriots were becoming less keen on choosing sides on issues of religious conflict. Kavaler's position may be more correct in this sense. If we assume that Bruegel shared similar behavior to men like Ortelius, then it would appear that Bruegel's artistic voice would reflect those views. These men were in many ways no different from the academic elite of today, only the consequences for dissent were more serious. They shared intellectual freedoms in private, but were bound publicly by the laws and moral codes of the day. They would not dare speak against the Catholic church in public, for example, lest they destroy their livelihood, or worse.

The Beekeepers was probably never intended to reveal its secrets, except perhaps to those in the know. *Disguising*, therefore may be the operative word in interpreting *The Beekeepers*. Nearly every aspect of *The Beekeepers* seems to be hidden, cryptic, or disguised -- much more than in Bruegel's other work. The mysterious nature of

The Beekeepers may be the most compelling evidence that Bruegel was actually communicating controversial ideas. Conversely, besides folly (another central theme), the theme of temperance or moderation, is a thread that runs through nearly every work of Bruegel's. Bruegel shows us the consequence of ignoring these moral codes again and again in images like *Dulle Griet*, from 1561, where Bruegel draws our attention to the evils of excessive power. (Many scholars also believe that *Mad Meg* also critiques the notion of women in position of power. Powerful women came to symbolize but one way in which the world was out of balance, or more commonly put "upside-down.") The *Fall of Icarus*, from 1555-1560, is yet another major work that uses a classical theme to demonstrate the perils of hubris or exceeding one's capabilities. Again, moderation is the thread. Even in an apparently benign painting such as *Bird Trap in the Snow*, 1565 (fig. 6), a large hole in the ice awaits potential reckless skaters playing hockey. The bird trap, a heavy door propped by stick attached to a trip wire, serves as a warning. Perhaps *The Beekeepers* offers a similar warning, one that nevertheless refers to Protestant and Catholic turmoil. Rather than a polemical message, there is a subtler message here. Bruegel's time was frightening and uncertain. Bruegel would have seen the pitfalls of "immoderate" behavior of both sides -- uprisings, the Inquisition -- wars in the name of religion. Extremist views threatened the stability of Bruegel's world. In a sense, Kavaler and Sybesma are both correct, in that the synthesis of their arguments leads us to a more accurate interpretation. Perhaps Sybesma is too

narrowly focused on Protestant and Catholic relations in her interpretation of *The Beekeepers*. In this regard, Kavaler may be more correct. Whether Bruegel created the drawing with the intention to draw the viewer's attention to these issues can never be proven. Nevertheless, there is ample evidence showing an awareness among humanists of the bee/church metaphor long before *The Beekeepers*. It is certainly possible, but seems unlikely, that Bruegel was not conscious of these connections as he created *The Beekeepers*. It is also possible that in spite of this awareness, Bruegel nevertheless simply created an innocent genre image depicting beekeeping for mass production. Even if this were the case, Bruegel provides anomalies and unusual elements that speak to the intellectual, or "humanist" sixteenth-century viewer's sense of questioning. This notion alone elevates *The Beekeepers* beyond merely a genre work. *The Beekeepers*, therefore, functioned on many levels. Its meaning depended on the viewpoint of its audience.

[1] Jetske Sybesma, "The Reception of Bruegel's *The Beekeepers*", *Art Bulletin* 73, September, 1991, pp. 467-478.

[2] Matt Kavaler, *Pieter Bruegel, Parables of Order and Enterprise*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK, 1999, 233-254.

[3] Ibid, 239.

[4] Jetske Sybesma, "The Reception of Bruegel's *Beekeepers*", *Art Bulletin* 73, September, 1991, 471.

[5] Nadine M. Orenstein, Metropolitan Museum of Arts, New York, 2001, 239.

[6] Matt Kavaler, *Pieter Bruegel, Parables of Order and Enterprise*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK, 1999, 234-235.

[7] Carol Van Mander, *Dutch and Flemish Painters*, Arno Press, New York, 1969

[8] Wolfgang Brandt, "Die Bienenzuchter verraten, was sie sind: Eine neue Deutung der Zeichnung von Pieter Bruegel", *Kunst und Antiquitaten*, no. 4, 1989, 59-61, in Orenstein, 240.

[9] Michael C. Plomp, in Orenstein, 240.

[10] Ibid., 472.

[11] Ibid. 476.

[12] Jetske Sybesma, the Reception of Bruegel's Beekeepers, Art Bulletin 73, September, 1991, 467.

[13] Ibid. 470.

[14] Ibid. 475.

[15] Ibid. 478.

[16] Kavaler, 233-254.

[17] Matt Kavaler, *Pieter Bruegel, Parables of Order and Enterprise*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK, 1999, 233-234.

[18] Kavaler, 241.

[19] Ibid, 241.

[20] Ibid, 248.

[21] James Snyder, *Northern Renaissance Art*, Harry N. Abrahms, New York, 1985, 484-486.

[22] Martin Royalton-Kisch, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Drawings and Prints, from Nadine M. Orenstein, Metropolitan Museum of Arts, New York, 2001, 15.

[23] Snyder, 484

[24] Nadine M. Orenstein, Metropolitan Museum of Arts, New York, 2001, 7.

[25] Ibid., 41.

[26] Sybesma, 469.

[27] Philippe and Francoise Roberts-Jones, *Pieter Bruegel*, Harry N. Abrahms, New York, NY, 2002, 332.

[28] H.G. Koenigsberger, G.L. Mosse, *Europe in the Sixteenth Century*, Holt Rheinhart Winston, New York, 1968, 50.

[29] Ibid, 49-50.

[30] Ibid. 51.

[31] Ibid. 52.

[32] Zupnick, 283.

[33] Ibid, 283.

[34] Ibid. 283.

[35] Ibid, 260.

[36] William Monter, *Tolerance and Intolerance in the European Reformation*, Ole Peter Grell and Bob Scribner, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

[37] Ibid, 260.

[38] Kavaler, 36.

[39] Ibid, 40.

[40] Orenstein, 9.

[41] Snyder, 507.

[42] Orenstein,9

[43] Larry Silver, "Bruegel in the Capital of Capitalism", *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek 47 (1996), pp. 124-153*.p 132.

[44] Ibid 132.

[45] Ibid, 132.

[46] Orenstein, 9.

[47] Ibid. 9

[48] Margaret Sullivan, Bruegel's Proverbs: Art and Audience in the Northern Renaissance, *Art Bulletin 73*, Sept. 1991, 434.

[49] Ibid., 435

[50] Ibid. 438.

[51] Walter Gibson, "Artists and Rederijkers in the Age of Bruegel", Art Bulletin????? 427.

[52] Ibid, 430.

[53] Ibid, 430.

[54] Reinder P. Meijer, *Literature of the Low Countries*, Twayne Publishers, New York, 1971, 94.

[55] Ibid, 94.

[56] Ibid, 94.

[57] Ibid, 95.

[58] Ibid, 95.

[59] Kavaler, 144.

[60] Jan Van der Stock, *Printing Images in Antwerp*, Sound and Vision Interactive Rotterdam, Rotterdam, 1998, 168.

[61] Ibid. 170.

[62] Kavaler, 241.

[63] Ibid, 241.

[64] Ibid, 113.

[65] Zupnick, 260.

[66] Kunzle, 75.

[67] William Barker, ed. *The Adages of Erasmus*, University of Toronto Press, 2001, 214-215.

[68] Kavaler, 251-253.

[69] Koenigsberger, Mosse, 363.

[70] Arnold Hauser, *History of Social Thought*

[71] Zupnick, 283.

[71] Ibid, 283.

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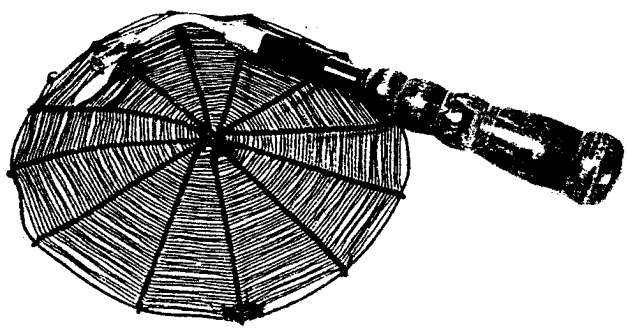

fig. 1

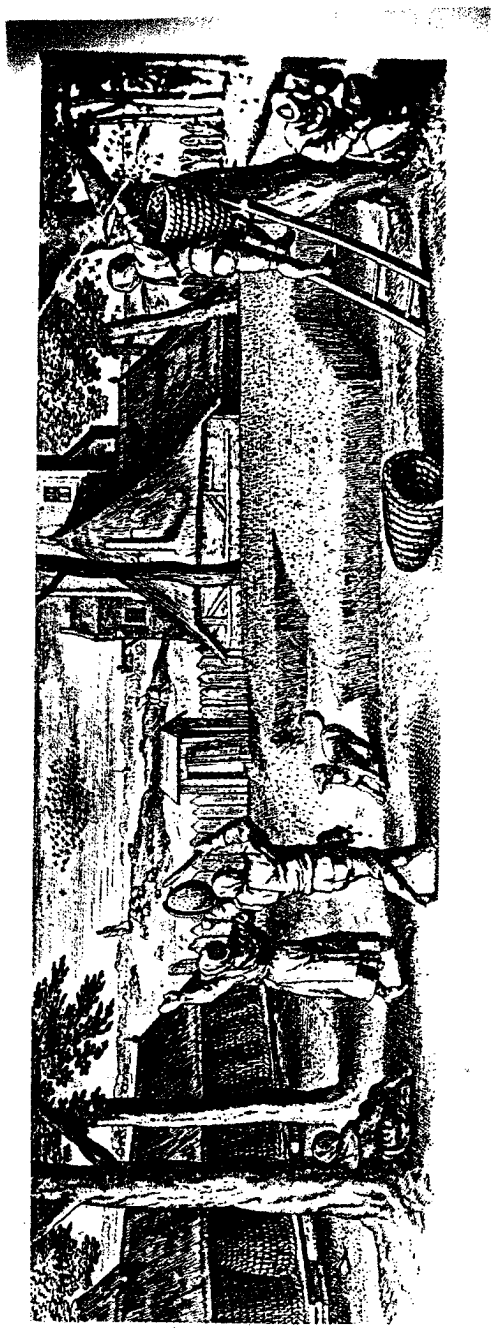

fig. 2

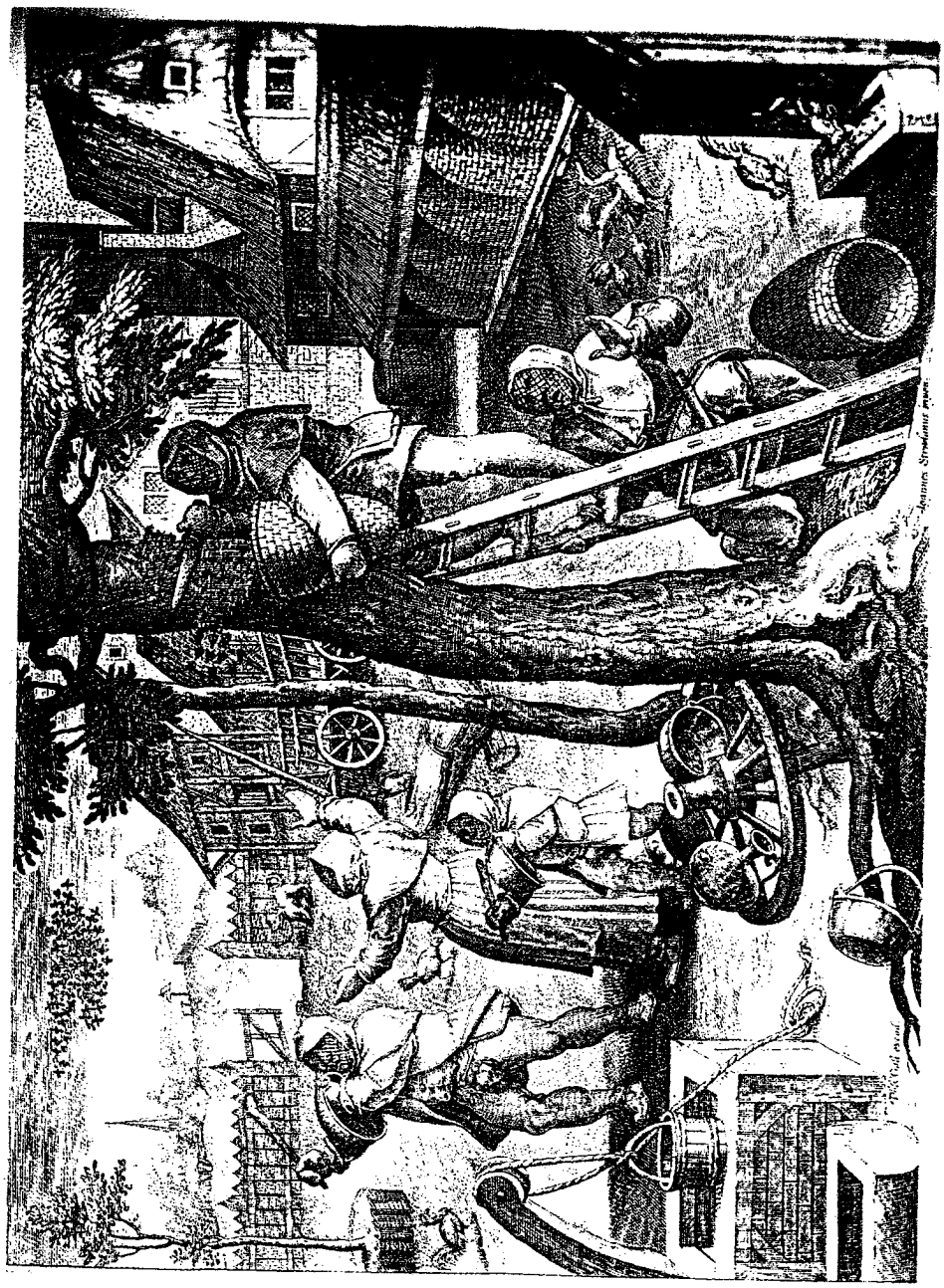

fig. 3

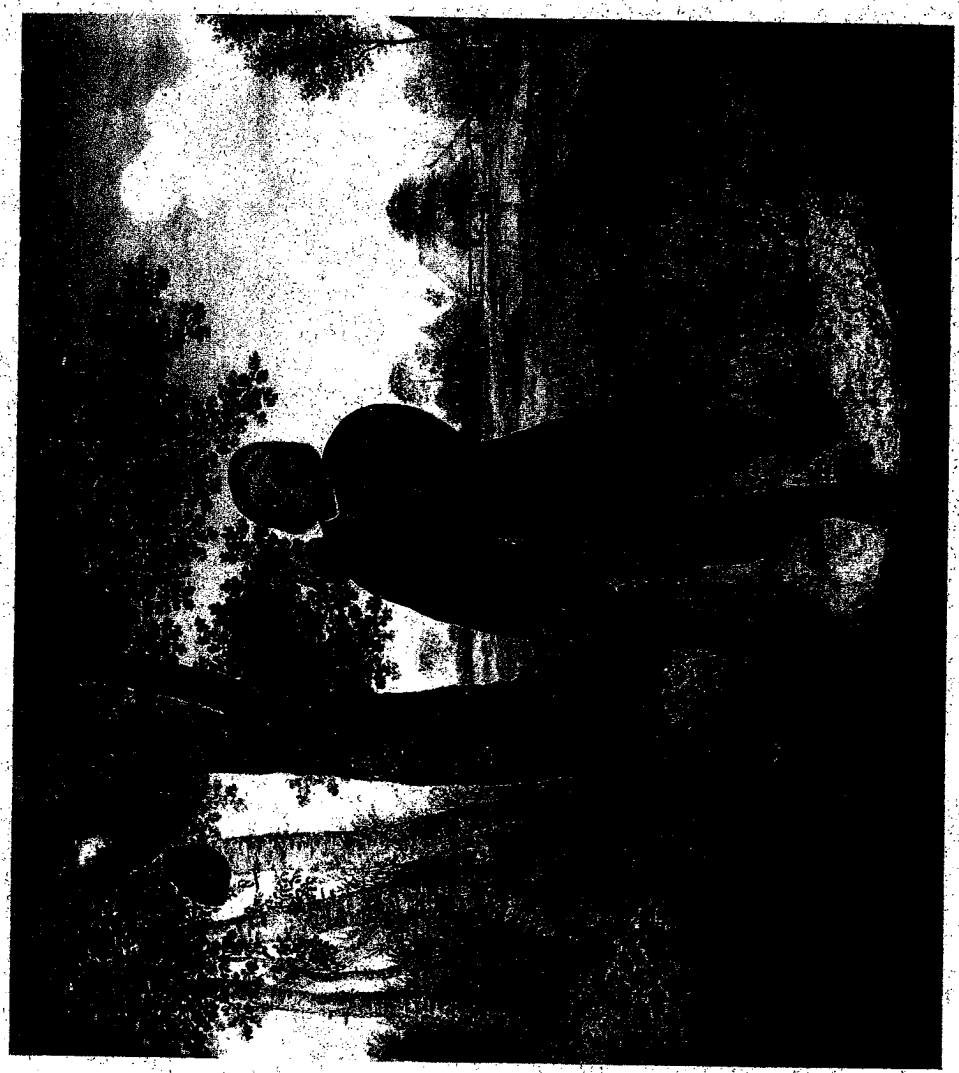

fig. 4

Fig. 101. Claes Jansz. Visscher after David Vinckboons. *The Bird-Nester*, ca. 1610. Etching. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1951 51.501.6584

fig. 5

fig. 6

Fig 131.
Pieter Bruegel.
Summer. Drawing. 1568.
Hamburg, Kunsthalle.
Photo: museum.

Fig. 135.
Johannes Stradanus (engraved by Philips Galle).
Beekeeping. From series of *Venationes.*
Engraving. Photo:
Antwerp, Stedelijk Prentenkabinet.

Figure 54.6a The bee hive of the Roman Church, as portrayed on the title page of a 1581 book by Philips van Marnix, Heer van St Aldegonde, first published in 1569 as *Den byencorf der H. Roomsche Kercke*.